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ABSTRACT

Towson State University (TSU) conducted a public debate series within the Maryland State Penitentiary, that state's maximum security lockup. Following delays due to an escape and subsequent lockdown that preceded the first scheduled debates, the prison program began in 1983 with TSU students debating the right to privacy. The continuing prison debate series was subjected to the interpretive approach of account analysis. Student debaters and inmate observers were asked such questions as why they took part, what benefits they received, whether the program should continue, and how the prison debates compared to other debating experiences. Students mostly felt that the debates occurred simply because TSU was asked to stage them. The consensus of the prisoners was that the debates offered something to do. Debaters found value in being able to enter the prison and view the inmates. The students felt that the program should continue, and many rated the program highly among their forensic experiences. Such an account analysis approach to research into debating programs may help program directors uncover what participants view as the values of audience debate, and enable the directors to confirm or negate what they surmise to be benefits. (SG)

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A Captive Audience: Debating in a Maximum Security Prison

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A Captive Audience: Debating in a Maximum Security Prison

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From time to time the forensic program at Towson State University has offered students varied public or audience debate experiences. These have included high school demonstration debates, public debates against British teams, public debates against the University of Maryland in the early 1970's, and exhibitions before local Toastmaster meetings. However over the last twenty years, none of these public forums have been sustained with any regularly. In 1982 one public program was initiated and continues on a fairly annual basis. That is the public debate series within the Maryland State Penitentiary, the state's maximum security lockup.

This paper will describe the debate experiences of several of the debate participants, as well as the reactions to the debates by two principle educators within the prison system. This paper serves the author as an objective assessment of the value of this particular public appearance.

Background on Audience-Centered Debate

Audience-style debate as an alternative forensic activity has had limited exposure in forensic literature. Among others, Wenzel (1971) and Ryan (1985) advocated audience debating to develop rhetorical competence, which appears neglected in tournament competition. Both forensic developmental conferences encouraged forensic programs to supplement their tournament regimen with public forums (Parson, 1984). Twenty-seven percent of American Forensic Association members responded to a survey concerning audience-centered debate (Thorpe, 1985). Thorpe claimed that the respondents had audience debates an average of five times a year, although her data for this estimate is unclear. She reported that the Pro-Con forum appeared as the predominate form of audience-style debate; but it was not described. This preliminary research on audience-centered debate does not provide a sound foundation for the scope or rationale of audience debating. Prison debating did not appear as one of Thorpe's findings.

Background on the Prison Debates

In 1982 the Towson State debate program was invited to debate in the Maryland State Penitentiary. Shortly before the debate was to occur, several inmates escaped, placing the entire institution on an alert and lockdown. This meant that such special programming was cancelled, until the Penitentiary was returned to normalcy. A debater lamented the lost debate in the 1982 Annual Report:

Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, November 20, 1989.

The big debate was set for April 30 at the "Big House" downtown.
However, it seems that at the Maryland State Pen,
It is much easier to get out than it is to get in.
The Towson debaters were already to go,
Complete with case, evidence cards and flow.
We were all set to argue about the rights of the accused;
We were already, but the new warden refused.
It seems the "Great Debate" will have to wait then,
Unless the Towson debaters decide to break in.

The year 1983 saw the initial debate take place at the Penitentiary. Four Towson debaters (Hessler, Geddes, Albert and Shrieves) debated the CEDA topic on the rights of privacy. The following year, four different debaters (Arroyo, Mollard, Brown, and Sitzer) continued the challenge by debating the justification for censorship for national security. The third debate in the series occurred in 1985. Mister, Weber, Smith and Order debated military support of non-democratic governments. It was after this debate that the team decided to spend a couple hot, summer days in the Penitentiary conducting a debate workshop. Several individuals returned to the prison after debating (Smith, Order, Arroyo, and Brown). In addition, Regina Davis joined the group. The goal, which never materialized, was to establish a debating society within the prison.

After a four year hiatus, the team returned to the prison as a minimester project in 1989. Marvel, Cattell, O'Neill, Ecker, and Walsh experienced the prison inside, and debated gun control.

Over a seven year time frame, four debates took place at the Penitentiary as well as a two-day debate workshop. Eighteen Towson debaters found themselves entering the prison gates.

Background on the Institution

The Maryland Penitentiary is the State's only maximum security prison for men. Maximum security means the highest security level (Inmate Handbook, 1988). These institutions are designed to control the behavior of inmates who "pose a high risk of violence, are escape risks, have a history or are likely to have serious disciplinary problems" (Inmate Handbook, 1988, p. 2). The major portion of the physical plant was built in 1894 and is still used (Division of Correction Annual Report, 1987). Some 1,200 men are housed in what is often referred to as "the Bastile" because of the imposing 2-foot thick granite exterior. On "60-Minutes" the Maryland Pen was referred to as "The House of Frankenstein."

The penitentiary under the auspices of Coppin State College and the College of Notre Dame offer an array of college degree programs. There are also a GED program, seminars, and workshops. Community volunteers assist with self-help groups (e.g., 7 Step, Left Bank Jazz) and plan special programs. The debate series came under the direction of the School Program associated with Coppin State (Division of Correction Annual Report, 1987).

Methodology

The interpretive approach of account analysis was first proposed by Harré and Secord (1972). They argued that "social psychologists should turn more of their attention to life situations. . . . Ordinary language concepts are the only concepts we have for describing action-meaningful behaviour" (p. 10). They posit that at the root of explaining social behaviour (their spelling) is identifying the meaning underpinning it. This discovery involves accounts. The account is "the actor's own statements about why he performed the acts in question, what social meanings he gave to these actions of himself and others" (p. 9).

Two account analyses have appeared recently in organizational communication literature. Geist and Chandler (1984) look at influence in group decision-making by this method, and Tompkins and Cheney (1983) examine the practices of graduate assistants in conforming to or deviating from a uniform course syllabus.

In applying account analysis to the public appearance of the Towson debaters at the Maryland Penitentiary, seven Towson participants were interviewed to establish their accounts of the prison experience. In addition, two educators in the Maryland Penitentary provided their accounts of the debates.

Results

The responses to the series of questions to the debaters follow:

1. Why did we debate in the prison?
   - -public service, curiosity
   - -we were asked, benfit others, I thought it would be interesting, to see the inside
   - -extend public relations of team, to present debate to inmates, fun
   - -we were asked, desire to do something visible which could be written about, not as an egalitarian mission to reform world
   - -we were invited, public service
   - -we were helping a Pen educator, for more forensic exposure, Towson exposure
   - -to get the perspective of people who had experience with guns

2. What benefits did you receive by debating?
   - -never met convicts before, interesting to see what they were like, hear what they had to say, their intellectual status, see the physical aspect of the prison
   - -more understanding of what it's like inside, what people are like, more understanding of myself, enjoyed this more than I thought I would because of my apprehension
   - -to see the inside, interact with prisoners in their environment, adapt to inmate audience
   - -to grow by seeing people from another side of society, gave me something to talk about, discovered the inmates were fairly articulate, interested in the world, demythologized

the prison class, impressed me how respectful they were to Marion (defenseless blind woman), treat people as humans gets respect
-surprised there was education in prison, something constructive in prison, interest level of prisoners, attentive to debate, they were keeping up with world, I had to adapt and be more sensitive to what I said (couldn't defend police brutality with cattle prods, etc.)
-feeling the atmosphere, noticed the regimentation, something to talk about
-to experience the prison, especially what maximum security like, make the prisoners less remote and more real, to realize these men had been there a long time and had not been out, guys were smart, had to make debate real world and not so theoretical

3. What did the inmates gain from the debate?
-new for them, starved for something to do, loved the opportunity to talk to outsiders, to describe how unjust it was
-form of recreation, diversion from prison routine, learn about debate
-to see the debate structure, get into topics
-to see you can disagree through words than through physical violence, give people VOICE, set an example of articulateness, participate in an exchange, elevate their normal life
-outside contact, somebody interested in them, got into debate
-see what forensics like, get away from prison monotony
-seeing young females, we respected their comments, they were really interested, people were interesteed in finding out their opinions.

4. Should we continue these debates at the prison?
There were eight unamimous and unhesitating "yes's".

5. Are there other alternatives we could do more worthwhile than prison debates?
-maybe high school debates, but this would not be as interesting to TSU college students
-working with high schools, learning by teaching
-debate to a more educated public but tournament debate is the best way to improve arguments
-mental hospitals
-other public forums, different but not better
-elderly, high schools, junior highs
-public debates like the British

6. On a scale of 10 to 1, with 10 being your most worthwile forensic experience and 1 being your least worthwhile, where would you place the prison debate experience?

The answers ranged from 6.5 to 8. The median was 7.5 and the mean was 7.37. As one respondent said, "Years later I still remember this experience quite vividly; it is certainly more memorable than your average debate round."

The educators within the Penitentiary offered the following accounts of the Towson debate episode:

The Principal of the Maryland Penitentiary's School, Dan Murray stated: The men have been in maximum lockup for 20-25 years and they still have the viewpoints of the world in the 1960's. These debates expose them to current issues; the men don't read a great deal; they hear current issues and different views on those issues. They are exposed to the outlook of college students and see their conduct. In the normal prison yard, there is a lot of noise and the men are very rowdy with heated exchanges, but in the debate setting, the men are in a professional, formal atmosphere. They hear how issues are confronted in a controlled manner, which is respected by the outside community. The men are exposed to an intellectual exchange of ideas where the positions of the debaters are researched and not just off the top of their heads. The debates enhance the intellectual approach of the men.

The only disadvantage cited by Murray which he had been made aware of by the inmates was that the debaters were white, upper middle class, privileged society and presented issues representative of a society the men were not a part of.

Marion Lanham, an associate professor of communication, who serves as an adjunct faculty member for the Coppin State College program, and program coordinator for the debate project, stated: The men are provided with a learning experience;; they are exposed to different and often conflicting views on issues. They are able to see and participate in situations in which verbal rather than physical violence is the basis for deciding differences. They are able to see the necessity of supporting positions with substantive, documented material. In a real sense, the debates are a way to kill one-two hours of prison time. But in interacting with outsiders, these men see that people on the street care and respect them as people, not animals.

She indicated she thought the students were provided with an eye-opening experience, that these men were intelligent human beings and rape of every female was not the only thing on their minds.

Discussion

From the debaters' perspectives, the debatea took place because the Towson State program was approached, not out of any philantropic initiation on the part of the debate program. But as a result of setting up the prison project, the debaters felt that the debates could serve as a public relations events. To present a debate and thus "do good" were not strong reasons for the debate project from those who had debated. Nonetheless, the educators made a strong case for the actual debate process being observed in the prison environment. Murray and Lanham both commented on the benefits to the intellectual growth of the inmates. But the debaters did not cite the educational

benefits for the prisoners as major reasons for the actual performance of the act.

The benefits to the inmates from the perspective of the debaters were numerous, but a more consensus view was that simply the debate was just something for the inmates to do. The benefits derived from the intrinsicness of the debate activity were not dominant values offered by the debaters.

The benefits accrued to the debaters were also predominately beyond the intrinsicness of the debate format itself. A strong theme emerging for the debaters was the experience of entering and seeing the prison and observing the inmates. The process of having to adapt the debate style to a public audience was not a major benefit mentioned by the debaters. The overwhelming benefit across the seven years of participants was the mere experience of the maximum security prison and its inhabitants. Lanham substantiated this benefit when she said the debaters "were provided with an eye-opening experience."

Without hesitancy, the past debaters confirmed that the experiences should continue as part of the Towson State program. But when asked if there were other alternatives to the prison project, the debaters offered a variety of audiences. These suggestions were qualified as not mutually exclusive to prison debating since that activity took relatively little in the way of time and money.

The worthwhileness of the prison experience was validated by the high rating it received by all eight respondents. In fact, four of the eight rated the experience an "8" out of "10."

In examining the reasons that Thorpe (1985) found for audience-centered debate, the Towson experience in the prison is not totally supportive. Thorpe found that visibility and audience analysis were the primary reasons for audience debating. Even though the Towson debaters mentioned public relations as a reason, no such publicity has been generated by the prison project. The visibility of this type of audience debate is very "confining," to say the least. Audience adaption, though accomplished for the most part by the Towson participants, was not cited by them as a reason for going into the prison.

Thorpe (1985) found that the educational activity of audience debate was listed as third by her respondents. From the Towson experience, the prison debate per se did not generate the educational activity, as did the experience of entering the maximum security prison and absorbing the atmosphere.

Thorpe's fourth reason for audience debate was polishing of delivery skills, and here again the account analysis of the Towson project did not support this as a benefit. The other perceived benefits noted by Thorpe were also not found in the current research.

Certainly, the uniqueness and powerfulness of the prison context overshadows the actual debating activity. Thus what other program directors may do in the way of audience debate may maximize the debate process from a learning point of view, as opposed to what the Towson prison project accomplishes.

This research, although limited in scope to only eight of the 18 participants, might provide support for the use of the reflexive research technique of account analysis. Thorpe's

survey research might be verified by such an analysis, rather than merely relying on the listing by program directors of what they perceive the values of audience debate to be. Account analysis might uncover the real reasons that exist and confirm or negate what directors surmise to be benefits.

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